

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

7 May 1962

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Probable Implications of the Fall of Nam Tha.

1. On 6 May, Communist forces attacked and quickly occupied the provincial capital of Nam Tha in northern Laos putting to retreat the garrison of approximately 4,500 Laotian army troops-- five infantry and three parachute battalions and supporting artillery units. The size and composition of the attacking force is, as yet, unknown, but evidence presently available indicates it consisted solely of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops and that it was a substantially smaller force than that defending the town.* There are indications that the Communist forces prevented the "neutralist" or pro-Souvana troops in the area from participating in the action. There are no indications of Chinese Communist

* Total anti-government forces--Pathet Lao, North Vietnamese, Kong Le and Khammouane Boupha units--in the Nam Tha area numbered five or six battalions, about 3,000 troops, according to recent ACSI estimates.

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troop participation in the attack and we believe it unlikely that any were present. However, there is some likelihood that Communist China aided, or at least permitted, the transit of Pathet Lao and/or North Vietnamese troops through a salient of Chinese territory to participate in the 3 May attack on Muong Sing and the subsequent attack on Nam Tha.

2. The Communist victory at Nam Tha virtually eliminates Laotian government authority along the entire northern border of Laos, and it increases the vulnerability of Luang Prabang, the lightly-defended royal capital. The Communist victory almost certainly cost the Laotian army considerable equipment and supply. It will further weaken the Laotian army's remaining self-confidence and willingness to fight. In view of the importance General Phoumi publicly attached to Nam Tha, and his considerable investment of troops and equipment in its defense, the Communist victory will probably cause him considerable loss of prestige within the Laotian army and government apparatus. However, neither the government, the army, nor Phoumi's position is likely to disintegrate suddenly as a result of the Nam Tha defeat.

3. General Phoumi reinforced the Nam Tha garrison several times, despite MAAG and embassy advice and he had just finished the

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transfer of an additional parachute battalion a week before the attack. Whatever Phoumi's motives may have been, he offered the Communists a very tempting target in both military and political terms. General Phoumi will now point to the Nam Tha attack as proof of Communist duplicity and disrespect of the May 1961 ceasefire agreement. He will be able to cite the Nam Tha action as conclusive evidence of Souvanna's inability or unwillingness to influence Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao, and reiterate his argument that Souvanna is under Communist control and that negotiation of a coalition government under Souvanna would be tantamount to giving Laos to the Communists. He would like to bring about a reassessment of the US policy to install a coalition government under Souvanna and, failing that, to delay as long as possible the implementation of such a policy.

4. The Communist attack on Nam Tha was a clear violation of the May 1961 ceasefire agreement and a departure from the Communist's past pattern of limited and small-scale military attacks. Whatever validity the ceasefire agreement had may now be destroyed. The Communists recently have resumed their airlift to Tchepone and have renewed small-scale military activity in South Laos. We continue to believe that the Communist forces

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in Laos could defeat the Royal Laotian Army, piecemeal as at Nam Tha or by seizing the major towns along the Mekong remaining in government hands. We do not believe that the Nam Tha attack marked the opening of a general countrywide offensive, though we think it likely that the Communists will increase military pressure on Laotian government strongpoints, such as Saravane and Attapeu at times which suit them.

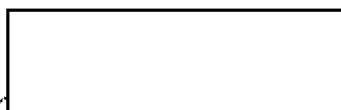
5. The attack, and the manner in which it was conducted, provide further proof of the decreasing military role and strength of the "neutralist" forces and the increasing tendency for the Communist troops to assume exclusive jurisdiction in certain areas and in certain military situations. The attack also underscores Souvanna's decreasing political influence even though it is possible that he would consider the attack as justifiable pressure on Phoumi in view of the latter's stubbornness in negotiations. In any event, the Communists are anxious to extend their control and influence over as much of Laos as possible while applying pressure on Phoumi.

6. There probably is no single explanation of the Communist attack on Nam Tha. We believe that the following considerations entered into their calculations. Phoumi did present the

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Communists with an extremely attractive target. They almost certainly calculated that the seizure of Nam Tha would undercut Phoumi's position, further demoralize the Laotian army and government, and, perhaps, cause the US to increase its pressures on Phoumi. Moreover, Nam Tha is a key point in the control of northwest Laos and there are clear military reasons for a Communist decision to seize and hold it. Events of the past year have probably convinced the Communist side that the risk of US intervention has lessened significantly and that they can increase the level of military operations in seeking to achieve their objectives.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



for SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

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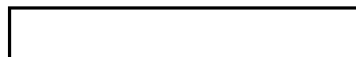
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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Probable Implications of the Fall of Nam Tha

1. During the special meeting of the Watch Committee on Sunday, May 6, General Carter laid on a memorandum on this subject to be ready for the Director by noon today.
2. He also requested that we prepare a SNIE on this subject for USIB consideration Wednesday, May 9.



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